The Children of the Kaveri

SHANKER RAM

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BY

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Prof J. C. Rollo's foreword to the 2nd edition :—

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This simple representation of village life on the banks of the Cauvery is true and subtle.

A sympathetic and vivid imagination gives life to the persons and reality to their problems. There is no pretence at mighty effects of situation or rhetoric. By entirely natural talk and the slightest touches of description the atmosphere of this old and changeless rural life is communciated. Nor is the story-teller's instinct lacking: these are not mere sketches, but really good stories. It is to be hoped that there will be many more the theme being inexhaustible.

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"I have gone through your book with pleasure. Your stories of the simple life of the villagers are well told and have a quiet charm about them."

Sir R. Venkata Ratnam Naidu, Ex-Vice Chancellor, Madras University writes:

"I heartily thank you for a copy of your book, The Children of the Kaveri, a charming group of pretty stories skilfully told. I have greatly enjoyed reading them. You disclaim sensation and amply make up by healthy sensibility and tender sensitiveness. I cordially wish you rich literary success."

The Modern Review writes :—

"The stories are full of quiet beauty, pathos and tender human appeal and possess the art which conceals art. One can never have too much of such stories, and the author is to be congratulated on producing such an excellent book."

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IS IT A CRIME TO IGNORE ANOTHER'S FAITH?

The men were busy at work splitting and warming the green bamboos in the fire, to give them a sort of temper. Two woven coracles were drying in the sun waiting to be covered and fitted with leather. Their master, the ferry contractor, had just left for his mid-day meal. The cool shade of the banyan tree and the fine breeze on the high bank took much of the sting out of the summer heat, and talk went round freely among the men.

"This is the first time we ever wove eight coracles for our ferry," said one of the men.

"But this is also the first time that it was bid for at one thousand five hundred rupees by a fool," said another.

"No, he will fool most of us," said an old man, furtively looking about him. "He has

got long sight, that man, I tell you. Two or three weeks before the bidding, he was going about here and there and enquiring about betel leaf and plantain fields, as if he was going to trade in them. Our village has six hundred acres of betel leaf cultivation this year, and he knows they all have to pass through our ferry."

"Ah, what a knowing fellow!" admired another.

"But there is trouble ahead," prophesied another man. "He may be clever and all that. But he is a thorough stranger to our village, and our boatmen aren't going to take kindly to him."

"How do you know that?" asked the old man.

"Old Veerasamy, who has been having the contract for the last fifteen years, isn't going to get baulked so easily. He has persuaded the men not to touch a pole, unless he

is given a share in the contract, and they have promised to stand by him loyally."

"It may be a mere bluff, but even if they are serious about it he will import men from other villages," said the other man.

"That won't do in our village, friend. The men will have many broken limbs before they return home." said the other.

"Wait a minute, we will know everything. There comes Pichai," said the old man and the men looked where he pointed.

A short old man with a shaggy face was crossing the sandy bed towards them, with a peculiar swinging, half-staggering gait. Above a bushy growth of unkempt grey hair all over his face, his eyes and nose stood out prominent. His short brawny arms and well built chest bristled with thorn-like hair

"He is dead drunk," said one of the men.

"There is no 'dead' for him," said the old man. "I have never yet seen him stagger or fall or make one false stroke while rowing,

though he had been living on nothing but liquor for twenty-four hours."

"Oh, the way he keeps his strength and health at this age and with so much drinking is a wonder," said another.

The new arrival saw them and slowly came towards them.

"How are you getting on, boys?" he queried, inspecting their work with a critical eye.

"We hope to leather all the coracles by Friday next, Uncle," said one of the men.

"Where are you going in this hot sun, Pichai?" asked the old workman.

"I've got to go as far as Meyur. My grand-daughter — you know Valli's daughter —she is to be married the day after tomorrow. They want the old man for the feast—"

"And drink," said one of the men.

"Yes, for the drink and drink alone I am going. Are you pleased, you white-

livered weakling? The fellows of these days can't take three pegs without coming to grief, Kolandai," he said, turning to the old man and stroking his beard, in the lower regions of which forest, dewlike drops of toddy still stuck fast. "At your age, I could take eight and pass a thread through the eye of a needle without a tremor. We of the old stock are of steel frame, aren't we?" he said, turning to the old man for approval.

"Undoubtedly," responded the old man. "Sit down and let us have a chat."

"No time for chat," he said, reluctantly sitting down. "I have got eight miles before me; I can't walk so quickly now."

"You ceased to change twenty years ago, Uncle, and you needn't fear you will hereafter," said one with a laugh; "and how about this new contractor, your master?"

"My master! Is there anybody to master me in this ferry, you fool? Don't you know I am always master here?"

"Well then, tell us, how is the new man going to fare?"

"Well enough, is what I think," said Pichai. "He is a clever, good fellow, one of those educated ones with money."

"But I heard the men had made up their minds not to move a pole till Veerasamy was given a share in the contract," said Kolandai, the old man.

"Veerasamy be damned!" said Pichai. "He was never straight with us, and I am glad he got his deserts. But this new young fellow is very decent. He knows how to give and take respect, and it is a delight to speak with him. It is true he has got some curious ideas. For instance, just think of his questioning why toddy pegs should be offered to our Karuppanna (the ferry deity). 'If you want a drink,' he says, 'say that frankly and have it: why all this nonsense about Gods and devils?' I think it is all due to his wretched English education. These educated fellows need a lot of convincing. But he

never stints money, not he. It all depends on how you approach him."

"So you are backing up the new comer," said one of the workmen.

"No backing up. It is just doing my duty. He is what you call a gentleman. He got the contract in the open bidding, and has already paid us a month's wages in advance. He is playing square and square play will be respected in this ferry so long as I can lift a pole," he said striking his chest.

"The old chilli is still pungent," laughed a young fellow.

"Chillis never lose their pungency, don't you know that, fool? Next August, I shall be seventy-eight, and let me see how many young chillis are here who will compete with me in a ten hours' row," he said cocking his head and surveying the men with a smile of self-satisfaction.

The men allowed him his vanity. They always respected his glorious past. Kolandai

broke the silence by asking him when he would return.

"I can't say," said Pichai. "My wife wants me to stay there three or four weeks, along with her."

"Three or four weeks? Why, next week the river won't be fordable. Don't you see the freshes?"

"Yes, but what of that? The men will start work without me. I have told the contractor. And now I must be going, lads. Good day," he wished and sauntered off.

The launching ceremony is an annual event to the boatmen. It is a *gala* day when they are officially (that is, with their master's knowledge and money) allowed to go tipsy. Every man has his fill, and participates in the sacrifice and spoil of a goat, generally a fat one and the master's gift. But this year the custom of centuries was threatened with dissolution. The new master was reported to have said that he would not countenance

any such thing. That was rather disquieting news. So Arumugam, the most trusted of Pichai's lieutenants, with all the rest of the boatmen, repaired to his house and did all he could to persuade him of the importance of the ceremony. But it was in vain. He was obdurate. Their monotonous arguments at first bored him, then made him furious.

"Look here," he said; "I am not going to stand any more of this nonsense. Tell me, what is the usual expense for the ceremony?"

"Only fifteen rupees," ventured Arumugam dubiously.

"Well, I will rather give you twenty rupees than allow goat-killing and all that kind of thing. I can't be a party to it. It is only on principle, you understand? I have certain principles, and I shall be breaking faith with God if I don't adhere to them. I don't question your doing anything in your own homes. I am pledged to suppress and

abolish, so far as it lies in my power, the slaughter of any life. How then can I encourage it? You will have to omit that item in the programme and make up for it with something else."

"Without a goat's sacrifice to Karuppannan, no coracle can cross the river," said one of the men.

"What do you mean? Is it a threat? You have tried my patience too long. I am not going to be baffled because some of you, or even all of you, may go on a strike. I *can make arrangements.* I am ready for anything."

"Don't care for that stupid fellow's words, Master. What does he know? We are not educated people. Illiterate countrybred fools we are, and at times we talk without meaning. Pray, reconsider our case," said Arumugam

"There is nothing to reconsider. I shall risk everything to see that coracles cross the river without a goat's sacrifice—and that, this

evening as already arranged." With this he abruptly left them.

All eyes were turned on the unwitting offender. "He was wild enough without your goading him," was Arumugam's caustic remark. The man winced under the reproof and blinked helplessly.

There was no use in approaching him again. They knew that. It was not money that stood in the way. It was his accursed "principle." The ferry contract was not the thing for principled mad men, and now they were fully convinced that Veerasami's failure was their own personal loss.

What was to be done in the circumstances? What would Uncle Pichai think of the launching ceremony without a goat-sacrifice? It *was* unfortunate that he should be absent just then. But then who could have foreseen this absurd development? The man was stark mad to interfere with an immemorial custom. With all his talk of

sense, principle and all that rubbish, he just couldn't understand *their* principles. They put their heads together, and after a long deliberation, pitched upon this ruse. They would ask for a postponement of the ceremony till the next day, and meanwhile sacrifice a goat stealthily in the night, and after a show of a resistance, accept his twenty rupees on the morrow. It was agreed not to take anybody into their confidence. For once in their lives they would do without the priest. It was very bad. But giving up the sacrifice would be still worse. They decided to see him again at his house after a few hours, just to give him time to cool down.

But after a few hours he was not at home. He had gone to the ferry. They wondered whatever he was doing there without them. They hurried to the ferry, and what a sight for them!

Two boats had been launched and were in charge of the rascally Mangalam Brothers, those low-bred farming rustics, who had learnt

punting and now and then sold their knowledge to the discomfiture of legitimate boatmen. The liberal coating of turmeric and saffron on their hides indicated that there had been some sort of ceremony.

The men were simply wild.

"This will be the last time they play their dirty game," roared one of the men; "I will do for them."

"It is enough if we break their wrists," said another.

"Fancy ignoring us!—and the sacrifice. It is beyond bearing," said a third.

"Let us see how long he can get on with them. We will teach him a lesson. But where is *he*? He isn't in any of those boats," said Arumugam, carefully observing the receding coracles.

"Hush! there he is coming," warned a man who had seen him emerge from one of the reed-bushes.

"I am sorry you have been too late." he said, with such a natural and sweet smile that the men chafed under it. "Perhaps it was better that you were not present. It would have hurt you so. Here is twenty-five rupees—I have added an extra five that you may celebrate your usual festivities more richly. Make up for the absence of the goat by plenty of flowers, fruits, milk and honey. I can assure you no God will ever reject a sincere offering. I hired those two men only for the day, to save you the unpleasantness of a sacrificeless launch Don't be afraid. No harm will come of it. Do you think I am less concerned about the successfnl working of this ferry than you? I tell you these sacrifices are the relics of a by-gone barbarous age. They should have had their burial long ago. Take this money, Arumugam." He offered it with an air of such goodwill and complacency that for mere cheek Arumugam thought nothing could beat it. But then, the

man's suavity was so unaffected and graceful that it was perplexing.

Arumugam detested him, but felt powerless to escape the unconscious influence of something good and noble in him, and he took the money, without the least willingness to take it.

It was an anxious period for the men, the next few days. Days of unrest and nights of sleeplessness. It was true that but for the absence of the sacrifice, the ceremony had been one of a life-time. But still the faith of their fathers rebelled against an innovation, and smote them with remorse. And what with the incessant preachings of their master against the tyranny of cruel and foolish customs, his indisputable interest in their welfare which they did not take long to find out, the sudden and early flood necessitating strenuous work and vigilance, and the relapse of Uncle Pichai's rheumatism which confined him to bed for nearly three months at his daughter's house, matters had quietly settled

down, and all the gossip about the sacrifice had gone into the limbo of forgotten things.

Uncle Pichai's rheumatism had affected neither his appetite nor his digestion, so that the only change found in him after recovery was that he limited himself to two or three visits to the tavern and helped himself to small quantities. This was all the total abstinence he could observe under medical advice. The master paid particular regard to his health, and asked him to superintend only mail and passenger coracles, for some time to come. But to Pichai work was the very salt of his life. He throve on it. His motto was either solid substantial work or going on the spree So now he needed a busy time to keep himself off drink. He spent the whole day in the plying boats, chatting, joking and occasionally nagging the men.

The flush periods of the flood were over, and the more difficult time of the monsoon season had set in. The squally

weather called forth all the boatmanship of the men. Pichai invariably piloted the mail and passenger coracles. Rough and dangerous tasks thrilled the old boatman. He just loved that kind of work. The fierce wind and rain did more good to his hardened frame than the doctor's medicine. Ballasting the coracles he never assigned to anybody. It was a delight to the master to watch the old veteran fuss, curse and swear at every-body, dragging the sand-bags this way and that, till he was entirely satisfied and all the while cracking jokes amidst peals of laughter. He was a hard task-master, and never shirked setting the example of a hard worker. He bullied the men and used language which from anybody else they would have resented with disastrous consequences, but in his case they passed it over with a sort of indul-gence and even pleasure.

One morning a marriage party had to be rowed across very early, that they might

catch the 6-30 special. The hirer, a villager of some position, had asked Pichai over night to be present at the ferry punctually at five with some of his good fellows.

With the cock's crow, Pichai, with Arumugam and another, proceeded to the ferry, selected the boat with the least oozing, baled out what little water was in it, spread sufficient hay to smooth the rough bamboo surface, conveniently adjusted the foot-hold, and made everything spick and span. Discrimination was always Pichai's strong point. He knew that marriage parties were most particular about omens. A slight stumble near the foot-hold, a small tearing of dress by a projecting piece of bamboo, the sudden drenching of a new cloth—all these things would have strange interpretations—interpretations which he believed in. It was his duty to give no room for any such mishap. Was he not the father and grandfather of numerous children? And further, there was the

prospect, nay the certainty, of a liberal present, though that consideration was secondary.

The party arrived, and were much pleased with Pichai's arrangements.

The river was at least a mile broad, and a mile and a half's crossing would have to be effected before reaching the other bank. The wind was just rising, and as it took nearly an hour to develop into a gale, it would be all smooth sailing. Three long well-tempered bamboo poles were plied. The coracle flew, yielding to their joint push. After a furlong's row, Arumugam wanted to slide her down to a deep current which ran straight across, for a considerable distance. He plunged the pole in the sand, cut her course with a pull, and pressing his stalwart foot on her side, bent the pole with all his strength to head her up, when crash it went into two.

An oath escaped him.

"You shouldn't have tried all your buffalo's strength on it, like a fool," said Pichai.

"But I have done nothing new," protested Arumugam, and took the pole proffered by Pichai who allayed the murmured misgivings of the female passengers by stating that the loss of the third pole made no difference for a passenger boat, since it was rarely used.

Half way across, began the strong and deep currents. Here all their long and strong pulls were needed together. A third pole would no doubt have been useful. Arumugam's mate made one false stroke and the result was that the coracle drifted down ten yards in a second.

By this time, the wind was gathering force. These monsoon winds were incalculable. Suddenly they would change their direction and blow from nowhere and from all sides, forming embarrassing whirls. Just

now they were in one of their freaks, and gave the boat such a vigorous shake that its occupants almost believed that their last moment had come. It was all a moment's tremor.

"Steady, steady," rallied the voice of Pichai. "There is nothing to fear. Don't crowd in like that. It is just a passing whirl." And even as he spoke, a passing whirl forced her to heave on her side and receive twenty gallons of water from the undulating surface.

"Let her alone" cried Pichai. "Let her drift to her own convenience." A few moments later, "What can be wrong with us?" he exclaimed, biting his lips.

"We have come to the Devil's Bush, eh? That means we have drifted down three miles. Look out!" he shouted, pointing to a huge submerged babul-pod tree over whose thorny branches the waters splashed past. With frantic efforts, they averted an immediate disaster. A moment's delay and the

coracle's hide would have been torn to shreds.

Pichai took the pole from Arumugam, then laid it down and clasped his hands in prayer. " Karuppanna, this is not the time to try us."

"My God, it is that!" exclaimed Arumugam.

"What?"

"No goat was sacrificed to Karuppanna. That fool of a master wouldn't allow it."

"You mean to say that you launched the boats without a sacrifice to Karuppanna!"

"Yes," he murmured.

"You allowed it, you sacrilegious scoundrel?" he said, and struck him. Not a muscle of that strong man moved. He hung down his head, in shame. That paternal punishment seemed nothing to his horrid crime. "Don't stand there like a mile-stone, you, sinner. Take that pole from him and push on," blazed Pichai.

For the second time, he put down his pole, clasped his hands and prayed. "Oh my father Karuppanna, these are Thy children. For the sake of our sins tease them not, punish them not. From the day I handled my first pole till now, have I ever offended Thee ?" His Karuppanna seemed to stand before him. These foolish boys didn't know what they did. Forgive them their sins, I will atone for them. Do not refuse me, my Lord. I will compensate, more than compensate, for the loss of Thy sacrifice," he pledged, striking his left palm with his right. "That is all my offering. What more can I do ? Wilt Thou accept it ? Yes ? Yes ! And now, steady, keep stroke with me regularly," he commanded Arumugam.

Two poles plunged, pushed and splashed up to plunge again with clock-like regularity. Not a word was spoken. All eyes were turned to the old man's face, his set lips, his rolling eyes, his waving beard and his wide and bushy nostrils hissing in and out his breath. Every

ounce of his strength seemed to have been gathered in his powerful wrists. His every stroke counted. The coracle made slow but steady headway. She had learnt to weather the waves. Fifteen minutes' hard and incessant pulling took them past the roaring currents The danger zone was past. Their track now was a smiling sheet of water gliding slowly and peacefully. But still Pichai never spoke. His lips not even so much as quivered. His brawny arms automatically worked on. The sweat streamed over his body. The shore was not more than a hundred yards away. He didn't care to look at it. Nearer and nearer they came. There were joyous wishperings of relief and gratitude. The boat scraped the muddy bank. The idle boatman jumped, and tied her to a bush.

With a wan smile, Pichai surveyed the happy faces. Then suddenly he pressed his body with his hand, groaned and fell. The strain had been too much for the old man. Many loving hands hastened to aid him. They

sat him up, and sprinkled water over his face, but it was no use. He had compensated for the loss of the sacrifice.

WHEN PUNISHMENT IS A BOON

The boy had searched all the plantain fields in the neighbourhood. Still not a single "felled" tree could be had. The plantains were too young to admit of "felling" for at least another month. There was only one field, near Kali's temple that he had not tried. But it was being watered, and it was against the un-written laws of agriculture to enter a "watered" plantain field. The boy hesitated for a moment. He *could not* go home empty handed, and he decided to look into even that. Sodden with the wet clay, he skated rather than walked through the whole slippery field, and at last came upon two felled trees. He took his knife and severed the smaller ends, from which their bunches had been removed.

A plantain tree is no despicable weight for a man, and two will be a sufficient load; and for a boy of eleven to carry two is next to the impossible. Still, Palani's

eagerness and impatience made him attempt it. He stood them close to each other, sat down and slowly poised them over his right shoulder. It was difficult enough; and when he essayed to rise up, not all his powers could make him even stir. After a minute's struggle, he held his breath and with a determined pressure of left palm over left knee-cap, gave an upward jerk—and fell on his back with the plantain trees rolling over his face and well nigh flattening his nose. There was a hearty burst of laughter. Palani scrambled to his feet, and turned in that direction with a guilty look. His fingers itched to nurse his injured nose. But he restrained himself. After all it was only old Jogi, the snake charmer, a low caste fellow. The boy grew bold. "What is there to laugh at?" he frowned, and looked over himself. The examination brought back his natural good humour, and he smiled.

"Two plantain trunks are awfully heavy, Jogi," he said, and the remark made the old man laugh again.

Upon that, the boy couldn't help laughing himself. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Trying to catch a snake. There are a lot of sheddings here," explained the old man. "But why do you want to carry the plantain trunks when it is so difficult?" he asked.

"For my cattle."

"What for?"

"For fodder."

"For fodder! Strange fodder they will make!--Do your cattle eat them?"

"They do. They have nothing else to eat. I have fed them on anything and everything since Father's death." And the boy's face suddenly grew sad.

"Ah! it is God's will," sympathised the

old man. "Carry them separately, child," he advised.

The advice was needless to the boy after his first experience. He took them home, sliced them into small pieces and divided them into three equal parts for his three animals—two buffaloes and one cow. He had a name for each of them. One buffalo was called "Bandy Leg" on account of that defect in its legs, the other was called "Parrot Horn" from the turn of its horns, and the cow was called "Shortie" from its diminutive size. Of these "Parrot Horn" was his favourite. It was more intelligent and obedient. It could discover his presence by his voice, and at times even by his footsteps.

At sight of the sliced plantain tree they grew restive, and devoured them faster than he had cut them. His mother had left home early in the morning for cooly work, and he helped himself to a little cold *kanji* (rice gruel). He lay on his back and thought of various

ways and means to feed his cattle. The famished creatures had been reduced to skeletons, and if things were to go on at that rate, they couldn't survive long.

Cattle for landless beggars was a punishment in his village. Such people had to buy fodder always. There was no village " green " for them. Every inch of land was always under cultivation — not allowed to lie waste even for a day. That was the curse of fertility. The only grazing ground was the prohibited Kaveri Bank. But he couldn't tip the maistry like the others. Many dark plans suggested themelves to him, only to be rejected as quickly as they formed. But something had to be done for the night. He remembered that Pichu Iyer was making hay in his hayfield that day. It was true he was a miserly man and never gave any hay in charity at the first harvest of the year, as was the custom. Still, Palani hoped to gather some pickings, and forthwith he proceeded there.

Half the field had been cleared of the dried stalks and stacked. Here and there the ground was strewn with stray grass. Palani took a long stick, clove one end of it, wedged a piece of wood into the opening, and began to sweep the ground. Little by little, he gathered a small quantity, and by the time all the hay was removed to the stacks, he had collected a good bundle, sufficient to last for a day for his cattle. He was much pleased with the result. He twisted a strand out of the hay and tied it neatly. He asked a man to help him lift it to his head. It was then that Pichu Iyer's eagle eyes saw his bundle.

"Who gave him that hay?" he asked the men about him.

"It is only the sweepings he has collected," said the men.

"What do you mean by sweepings? He has got a regular full-sized bundle," he said and proceeded to the spot. He shook the bundle, and then his head. "You allow this

to go on even in my presence. I don't know what you will be up to in my absence. And you, young rascal, you who have the audacity to steal so much hay, get out of the field," he shouted.

The boy in vain pleaded that he had gathered it, handful by handful, from the ground. He might as well have appealed to the broken idol of the belly God in that field. He wept bitterly. He cursed himself for having accumulated the sweepings in the field. He ought to have removed them to some lone corner— out of that cruel miser's sight. But too late to think of all that now. He walked home disconsolately. He could see nothing good in the whole world. When he grew a big man, he would then thrash Pichu Iyer. But it would be waiting too long.

As he turned the "Sluice Corner," he came upon Muni's cattle being driven to the pound by Sankaran.

"Why, Uuncle, what have they done?" he asked.

"Done? They have destroyed half an acre of my seedlings!"

"Where is uncle Muni?"

"Oh, he is a lord. He sleeps somewhere and allows his cattle to look after themselves. If once he has to pay a fine, he will come to his senses."

"How much fine will he have to pay?" he asked.

"You calculate—one rupee a day for every buffalo and eight annas for every cow or ox. There are three buffaloes and six cows. It comes to six rupees a day, doesn't it?"

"Six rupees a day! How will he pay, Uncle? And why do they charge so much?"

"For feeding them."

"Oh, they feed them!"

"Do you think they would starve them, you foolish fellow?"

"I don't know, Uncle. How long will they feed them?"

"As long as they remain."

"Suppose Uncle Muni can't pay the money, what will they do?"

"They will sell his cattle in auction."

The boy beamed with the newly acquired knowledge. He followed Sankaran to the pound, and saw the cattle comfortably housed in a shed secure from rain and sun. The pound peon strewed some hay before them and locked the gate. The boy clung to the iron bars for a little time, watching the cattle; and then, remembering it was Sunday, he poceeded to the "Young Grove" to watch the cock-fight, and in the excitement of that sport forgot all about his animals.

It was dusk when he returned home. "Parrot Horn" made a soft bellow at his arrival, and the others sighed a chorous.

"I have nothing for you, poor ones," he said and sorrowfuliy stroked them one by one. His mother was sitting by the oven, watching the boiling rice.

"Mother," he said, "why didn't you sell Shortie for four rupees when they offered it. Instead of starving to death, poor thing, she might have fared better elsewhere."

"Do you know for what they offered those four rupees, my dear? Just for her skin. They would have killed her as soon as they had bought her."

"Oh, the wretches!" the boy muttered, and fell silent. He lay down and did some serious thinking. He had some doubts whether the land near the brickfield belonged to Pichu Iyer or not. It was a large plot with a paddy crop on, almost ready for harvest. He hastened to Muthan's house and assured himself that it was Pichu Iyer's.

He passed a restless night and woke unusually early. His mother was still sleeping. He noiselessly untied the animals and drove them to the brick-field—then right into Pichu Iyer's lands. It was a red letter day to the starved animals.

The green stalks and the ripe corn were an undreamt of luxury to them.

They devoured them with avidity. Palani hid himsilf behind one of the brick-kilns. " Parrot Horn " once or twice stopped grazing and looked about for him. He intimated his presence by his voice and it went on with its work, satisfied. It delighted his heart to see them pull one mouthful here, one mouthful there, and enjoy themselves heartily. They were actually rolling in plenty.

The sun had not yet risen, but the day-light was clear enough to see objects. A few ploughmen with their cattle and yokes passed that way, then followed some women with their sickles, probably for harvesting. But none of them noticed his animals.

It was only after it was broad daylight that Shoni, Pichu Iyer's cowboy, entered the field to gather grass for the calves. As soon as he eyed the animals, he ran after them shouting at the highest pitch of his voice. The

frightened animals ran hither and thither trampling over the crops. Palani didn't know what to do. He was anxious to get out of the field without being noticed by Shoni. He jumped from cover to cover behind the kilns and got out of the field. It was no easy task for Shoni to drive them out of the field, and when he attempted to herd them together and take them to the pound he was greatly worried.

The animals scattered themselves, each trying to go home by a different way. Exhausted with his vain exertions to rally them, he got wild, and began to hurl brickbats at them. Even then Palani kept quiet; but when one of them hit the "Parrot Horn" near the eye and the poor creature shook its head painfully, he could stand it no longer.

Shoni was older by two or three years. But he was a coward and could be easily intimidated. He made straight for him. "Look here, you flat-nosed rascal," he threatened,

"If you hit them again, I will break your head. May be, they might have strayed into the field. Yon can impound them if you like. I will even help you to do that. But hit them you musn't."

"Is it so?" sneered Shoni, but the determined look in Palani's eyes awed him and he quietly took the proffered help.

Palani waited till his cattle were comfortably lodged. As usual the pound peon threw them some hay, but as they had just eaten to surfeit, they didn't care. The newness of the place made them shy for a while. By and by, "Parrot Horn" pawed the hay into bedding, lay down on it, and quietly chewed the cud, flapping its ears, now and then, to ward off the flies. The others followed this example, and Palani left that place.

Meanwhile, the news of their cattle having been impounded had reached Palani's mother. The poor woman got very nervous. She

couldn't believe it. Her son was too careful to allow such a thing. She was anxiously waiting for his return before going to Mr. Vembu Iyer, the village Munsiff, for a pardon.

Mr. Vembu was a very kind-hearted man and a big landlord. The post of village Munsiff was his family right. His father had held that honourable office before him for forty years, and his own tenure had amounted to nearly fifteen years, and during all that time he had rarely collected any sum in the shape of fine for impounded cattle. He always let them off with a warning.

Palani's mother only hoped that his usual generosity would be extended to her also. But Palani did not turn up at all. He had none of his mother's anxiety. On the contrary, he considered it as his first holiday for nearly six months. He joined his friends, played at hide and seek on the woody bank, and wallowed luxuriously in the river.

So that, disgusted with waiting for him for so long, she went to the pound, and thence to Vembu Iyer's home.

Pichu Iyer was there before her. She could hear him denouncing her son in the most objectionable language. She stopped at the doorway and listened. He was in a mad fit of rage, and was arguing that as he had sustained a loss of more than a hundred rupees, the cattle should be sold to make good that amount. Vembu Iyer shouldn't exercise any of his lenience in that case. If he did, he would be compelled to take other steps for the recovery of his loss. Vembu Iyer didn't interrupt him. He quietly allowed him to exhaust himself and his rage.

Palani's mother was not a foolish woman. She knew it was the most improper time to approach the Munsiff with her request, and she sneaked away.

When Pichu Iyer came out, convinced of the impossibility of auctioning impounded

cattle to make good his loss, and the hopelessness of ever recovering anything from Palani, he had only one thought, to thrash him well—in his own words, "to skin him alive."

Palani's mother kept in hiding to let him pass without noticing her. Then she entered the house and prayed for forgiveness. But Vembu Iyer was very angry. He chid her for her son's carelessness.

"If what Pichu Iyer says is true, he said, "the damage must be considerable, and you know Pichu Iyer is a troublesome man. If I excuse you, he will surely get me into difficulties. I am sorry I cannot do anything in this case. You have got to pay the fine, if only for the sake of pacifying him."

"But I haven't got a pie, master, and I have no hope of getting it anywhere. Pray take pity on me," she begged.

Vembu Iyer tapped his forehead for a solution. "Where is that fellow, your son?" he asked.

"He has not yet returned home. Prabably he is hiding on account of fear," she said meekly.

"I think I can do one thing. You see, as the village magistrate I can try your son for his misbehaviour. I shall award him six cuts as a juvenile offender. I shall tell Talayari (village watchman) Raman to inflict them mildly. That will satisfy that troublesome man and you will be free from the fine. Ask him to come to me."

"As you please, master," she said, and reluctantly went home to inform her son.

Palani was in his highest spirits. He was merrily singing, drumming on an empty pot for accompaniment.

"Whatever has come over you, Palani? You let the animals stray into a field, get them impounded, don't even care to come home to

let me know and then make merry over it. Is it for this you untied them this morning, so unusually, and before I got up ?"

"I did it for their welfare," said the boy light-heartedly.

"How could you be so unkind to your bereaved and suffering mother, Palani ?" she said, the tears brimming up to her eyes.

The boy was profoundly sorry for having wounded her feelings and was willing to make any amends. She didn't understand him. She couldn't. After a few minutes' abandonment to her grief, she told him sorrowfully all that had taken place between her and the village Munsiff, and remarked that he might act just as he liked.

Palani begged for forgiveness, assured her that he would do just as the village Munsiff wished and went out. There was no other way for him. He couldn't explain things to her just then. The prospect of receiving six cuts did not terrify him so much as the

certainty of their cattle's starvation. The whole of his well-thought-out scheme was coming to naught on account of his mother's foolishness. But the scheme itself was sound. It had all the potentiality of success in it. Well, he must think out something else on the same lines.

When he reached Vembu Iyer's, he found a sort of Panchayat assembled on his spacious pial. Only the restraining presence of Vembu Iyer and others prevented Pichu Iyer from venting his wrath on Palani and skinning him alive.

The proceedings were brief. Palani was sentenced to receive six cuts, as had been arranged with his mother.

Thalayari Raman took hold of a long cane. He had instructions to put in the first stroke a little "hot" and the others mildly. Palani extended his right hand. He was under no fear, but in the quickness of events he had forgotten one thing. There was a

fresh and deep knife-cut in his hand, and the hard end of the cane took that palm, right on that cut. The boy gave a piercing cry and rolled on the ground, writhing in agony and startling everybody present. Blood was trickling from his palm. Vembu Iyer's kindly heart melted before that sight.

Forgetting caste and creed, he raised the boy to his feet and soothed him with kind words. After the first paroxysm of pain, the boy managed to speak.

"I forgot my wound" he said sobbing, and extended his left hand for the balance of the punishment.

"You had more than enough, you foolish fellow," said Vembu Iyer and took him in, had his hand washed, and applied some medicine.

"There was no other way satisfying Pichu Iyer," he said commiseratingly.

Palani took note of his sympathetic attitude. His face brightened. He folded his hands and begged with great humility.

"Pray, master, don't let them out of the pound."

"Not let them out? Why?" said Vembu Iyer, dazed by the strange request.

The boy's lips quivered, the tears rushed again to his eyes. "No fodder at home," he said weeping. "Shortie will be the first to die. I took a lot of trouble to get them into the pound."

Vembu Iyer gazed at the boy in silence for a few minutes. "Your cattle will have fodder," he promised, and took him into his service as one of his cow-boys.

THREE YARDS OF PUMPKIN CREEPER

There was an unusually large number of visitors that day. Many of them had to find seats in the opposite house. Sivaramier sat in his customary place on the pial and dispensed his charm. Grandpa Nanu was sitting close to him eyeing the proceedings with great interest and frequently taking snuff. There were all kinds of cases. Rat bites and dog bites were common. There were also a few peculiar cases where the insects could not be indentified but the victims suffered deadly pain and bodily disfigurement, like red patches, black spots, pimply swellings, dropsy-like swellings, yellow faces, and so on. But to every kind of venom, from a cobra bite to a wasp's sting, Sivaramier ministered his only charm. It had its effect, and he paid the penalty of reputation.

To be disturbed twice or thrice in a night and at most inconvenient hours was

a familiar thing to him, since his generous nature had privileged snake bites and similar serious cases to call on him at any time, day and night.

He made no distinction between the rich and poor. Patients were attended to on the merits of their diseases. He noticed a particularly aristocratic-looking gentleman, sitting on the pial of the opposite house, who was patiently waiting his turn and who had been superseded by many subsequent arrivals. He backoned him to come.

The man bowed and said that he had no ailment but had come to invite him to his nephew's marriage at Kilur and incidentally to pay his respects. "I heard of the marvellous cure you effected in my sister's son", he said smiling genially. "You may remember he was bitten by a rattle-snake: Ramier's son."

"Oh, oh, you mean Kittu."

"Yes, sir, you have laid us under a lifelong obligation."

"Oh! don't mention it. What do I do? What can I do? It is all Lord Veerabhadra's favour. Why do you sit there like a stranger? Ramier and I are old friends, and if it comes to thinking about it, there must be even some sort of relationship. Please go in and have some rest. I shall send them away soon and join you. Here, Nanu Grandpa, is this the way you treat our Ramier's brother-in-law? He seems to be somewhat shy. He has been sitting there alone all this time."

The old man shaded his eye with his hand. "How could I know? Even familiar faces I can't recognize. My sight is getting dull. Are you not Seshan's son? I may have seen you as a child. Come on, let us go in," and the old man slowly led the way.

A beautiful dark-eyed girl of about twelve offered them seats. The old man drew her to his side and caressed her.

"This is his daughter and only child," he said, kissing her brows. "Her husband is studying at Trichinopoly."

" Do keep quiet, Grandpa," said the girl blushing and struggling to get free.

" Is she married ?" queried the visitor doubtfully.

" Oh yes! only the ceremony has not taken place."

" Don't tease me, Grandpa. Do let me go," she pleaded, colouring deeply.

" Why so shy, dear ? One more kiss," he said, brushing his woolly face against her soft cheek, and let her go.

" She is as good-natured as intelligent, and as clever as she is beautiful," he confided in a whisper loud enough to be heard by the girl, who was hurrying past to her mother in the kitchen.

" Do you know Venkataraman who lives next door ?" asked the old man.

" I don't know anybody in this village," he smiled awkwardly.

"You see, Venkataraman has an only son, a very clever boy studying at Trichinopoly. He has never failed in any examination and is now in the B.A. class. I always cite his quiet demeanour and brilliant studies as examples to erring boys," said Grandpa and slowly helped himself to a big pinch of snuff.

"Well, you see," he continued, "I always looked upon their match as an inevitable event. Some laughed at me and called it my senile weakness. They said match-making was an old man's hobby. But to-day my prophecy is to come true."

"From what you say either side ought to be proud of the alliance" said the visitor.

"Undoubtedly," said the old man, and added in a hoarse whisper: "Venkataraman had never much in the way of worldly means and he has been spending fast for his son's education. But the boy will earn it back in no time. What do you say?"

"Certainly; a good education is more than a fortune."

"I only hope so," said the old man scratching his head. "In the matter of spending, Sivaraman doesn't lag behind his friend, I tell you. Anybody else with his large income would have saved a lot. But he just spends everything. The only consolation is he does not run into debt.

"There is scope for him to amass a large fortune. A trifling fee for every case will bring him an excellent income," said the visitor.

"Oh! oh! don't say that. It is bad," said the old man biting his tongue, "Excepting the universal fee of two annas three pies, which goes into the sacred coffers of their family deity, Veerabhadra, he shouldn't accept a pie. Else the charm would fail. Do you think he works all the miracles only with his medicine? Ah, no. Why, as a matter of fact, his grandfather used to treat

many cases by giving a pinch of earth from the ground, and the fellows would be all right by the time they reached home. What do you say to that?"

"Then you attach no importance to his medicine."

"Not that. On the contrary it also is the God's gift. It was annouced to his great-grandfather in a dream, and it is a sacred family secret. In whichever way the cure is worked, you see it is all by the God's favour."

"For my part, I am very eager to show my gratitude in some practical way. Can't he accept at least some present?"

"Nothing personal. That would be the same as money," said the old man. "But you can do one thing."

"What?"

"Every year in April, a grand worship of the God is conducted and more than a

thousand people are fed. The sacred coffers are opened at that time, and these fees of two annas and three pies, though they come to a considerable amount, are not usually sufficient to meet all the costs, and the extra expense is met from his purse. Of his own free will anybody can spend for that festival."

"Then I will contribute a couple of hundreds in the shape of rice and dal."

"Oh, that will be excellent," said the old man. Just then Sivaramier came in.

"Now that I come to think more of it, he said, "have you not married Krishnier's daughter? Yes! then we are getting nearer. Our wives are cousins.—What do you want, Paroo? Come on, dear," he said to his daughter, who approached him coyly, but with a purposeful look.

"Mother wants a few green plantains from Uncle's garden," she said shyly.

"Say your father-in-law's garden," said the old man.

"Ah! Don't, Grandpa," said the girl.

"But I doubt if he is still in the garden. I will be the last man to enter it in his absence," said Sivaramier.

"He is still working there, Papa," put in the girl.

"Well then, I will get them. He is getting quite mad about his garden, Grandpa."

"There are only two things he loves in this world, his son and his garden. It is well he does love them so. It keeps him off his worry. What do you say?" said the old man.

"But there is a limit to it, Grandpa. The day before yesterday, he thrashed Maryay's son so brutally that I was quite disgusted with the sight. All for driving his cattle *near* his fence, which he has so thickly planted that even a snake couldn't pass through it."

"He knows the pains he took to bring it to its present condition. You ought to see it,"

he said, turning to the visitor. "His kitchen garden is the envy of the village."

"And the terror of cow boys," added Sivaramier.

"You are hard on him."

"What then, Grandpa? From a hobby it is developing fast into a madness. The whole day he spends in it digging, cutting, weeding, planting, transplanting, manuring, training the creepers or doing something or other. What is the net gain? He is bitten by something or other every month," he said smiling.

The old man choked with laughter, and brought on his cough, which lasted some minutes.

"Then?" he said wiping his watering eyes.

"Then, he has created a breeding place for venomous reptiles right in the centre of the village—a great source of trouble to me and his other neighbour."

"You foolish fellow.—Don't believe his words, Sir," he said turning to the visitor. "We will now go to the garden and you can judge for yourself."

They crossed the back-yard and reached the cattleshed which adjoined Venkataramier's garden. It was very spacious, running to the canal bund, like that of every other house in the row; but while Venkataramier's industry and enthusiasm had converted his into a lovely garden, Sivaramier had practically allowed his to run to waste. Here and there lingered a few stray beds struggling for existence against the ravages of cattle and indifference. The beauty of the other garden, which was here separated by a high and thick fence of *kiluvai* (a thorny plant), was in refreshing contrast to this neglect. Venkataramier was busy with the hoe. But for the profuse perspiration on his body, the hot sun seemed to have no effect on him. He had heaped up a big pile of weeds by his side, and was slowly

and carefully picking with the hoe, squatting on his heels. He neither saw nor heard their approch. Only when Nanu Grandpa's cough announced their presence, he turned round with a frowning "Who is that?"

His long and wiry body was well fitted for rough work. His lips were slightly parted and curled ready for scorn. In spite of his regular exercise his countenance was not healthy. Dark, sickly patches ringed his eye-lashes, giving him a worried look. His hair, prematurely grey, for he was only forty-two, was gathered in a small tuft behind. On recognising them, he forced a smile and welcomed them. When the visitor had been briefly introduced, he took him round the garden and showed him, with visible pride, the result of his labours.

All kinds of vegetables were represented and where the season was uncongenial, infinite care had been bestowed on them to prevent them from perishing. There

were half a dozen varieties of pumpkins, a dozen of beans, and more than a dozen of plantains. The pigmy plantain was his pet. It was not more than two feet high, but sprouted a bunch twice as long. And as he was narrating, with elation and at great length, how he had obtained the various specimens, the old man asked him in a whisper when his son was expected from the town.

"Why?" he asked with a broad smile.

"Don't ask such impertinent questions. This year the marriage must be celebrated. What do you say, Sivarama?" he said, turning to him. "Paroo is a rapidly growing girl, and it is not wise to postpone the marriage."

Sivaramier just shook his head in a non-committal way.

"Don't think you can dictate just because you are the bridegroom's father!" he said, again adressing Venkataramier "I

will fix an auspicious day during this vacation and the ceremony must be performed."

"Just as you please, Grandpa. By the way, thank you for reminding me of the vacation. Sambu and his friends are going on a short trip to the Courtallam waterfalls after the closing of the college, and he has written to me to send him some clothes in his suit case. Do you know anybody who is going to Trichy next week?"

"I shall be going in two or three days, and shall be glad to be of any service to you," volunteered the visitor.

"In that case, I shall be much obliged if you will take his suit case to him. I will give you his address. Don't you see the hand of God even in this small thing, Grandpa? I was wondering how to send his clothes and most unexpectedly our friend has come on the scene to help me."

"No atom moves, without His mandate," said the old man philosphically.

As the three were leaving the garden, the old man confided in his usual whisper "The fellow will do anything for his son."

The summer holidays were always awaited with eager interest—both by Sambamurthi, lovingly called Sambu, and Parvathi. With Sambu's arrival, Parvathi's possession of books, note-books, pens, pencils, soaps, perfumes and other articles of toilet had a sudden increase. Her parents noted the fact with an inward delight and kept discreet silence.

Her love of 'Uncle's' garden also seemed to have a sudden development. It took her often there. To add to that, her mother's indents on it were getting more frequent.

It was natural that Sambu should relieve his father of the superintendence of the garden.

Gardening work amidst familiar trees and plants was such a delightful and healthy change from the cramped atmosphere of a

city, where life, especially for a lad born and brought up in the village, was artificial and even unnatural. Venkataramier loved his garden too well to entrust it to others, but he couldn't deprive his son of its benefit. Further, his son was not an amateur, and there were other reasons also. So he betook himself to his neghbour's vast pial, where all the village gossips collected and talked of other people's affairs. His meal time exclud-ed, Nanu Granpa could be always found there. Sambu's presence in the village set his garrulous tongue flowing. At times he created awkward moments for Venkataramier and Sivaramier.

Whenever a girl friend of Paroo came in quest of her, Sivaramier would naively suggest that she might be in the garden, and whenever a chum of Sambu came searching for him, a similar suggestion would proceed from Venkataramier. At every such time an almost imperceptible smile would flicker over the lips of each. They had nothing to

wish for so far as their progeny was concerned. They were proud of their children, who were justly praised by their friends. Both fathers were eagerly looking to that happy day when they would be united in holy wedlock. The only obstacle to an early fulfilment of their desires was Venkataramier's temporary embarrassment. Sivaramier, for his part, would have been glad to settle what was after all, according to him, the petty question of funds. But he knew the over-sensitiveness of his friend, and dared not broach that subject. Meanwhile, he looked with fond delight on his daughter's love-making.

We seldom realize the full force of that old adage that 'man's proposal is subject to God's disposal, until we come face to face with facts. Nobody could have even dreamt that the thing would happen, and yet it did happen.

It was all on account of Chellan, Sivaramiers' boy-servant—a mere child of ten,

with a capacity for hard and steady work and up to every kind of boyish mischief.—No, he was only the ultimate cause. The prime cause was his three month's old calf, a young chubby creature, tingling with energy. He and the calf were close friends. When he had no other work, he fondled and played with it. Now the calf had a long-standing grudge against Venkataramier's fence. That high thorny wall had set limits to his playground and prevented his innate curiosity from trying the tempting verdure on the other side. Now and then, he stood near the fence and cast wistful glances. On this particular day while he was so preoccupied, something excited his interest. He frisked, cut capers and made fruitless attempts to reach something high up the fence. Chellan, who gleefully followed his every movement, went to see what it was. It was the curly tendril of a pumpkin creeper that was trying to encroach on their side. He peered this side and that, and with a low chuckle drew the creeper within reach of

the calf which took it in its mouth and slowly pulled at it, gradually receding with the yielding of the creeper. Chellan stood awhile grinning and giggling at its performance. When about three yards of the creeper had been drawn over, there was some resistance. The calf shook his head tugged at it with a firmer grip, and then the creeper snapped. Instantly the thick end of a heavy walking stick descended with a crushing force on Chellan's head. With a piercing yell, he jumped and sank down.

Venkataramier had sprung from nowhere. It was fortunate that the fence separated him, fortunate also that the stick was short.

Chellan's scream brought his master and his visitors from the pial to the backyard. The boy was just then staggering to his feet with shivering limbs. The moment he saw his master's kindly face, he broke down again sobbing. He could not speak, but the bump and the oozing blood on his head spoke

clearly. His master noticed Venkataramier's menacing attitude—his blood-shot eyes, his wild looks, his upraised stick and all.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Ask that blackguard," was the reply.

"Don't you see he can't talk?"

"Can't talk, can't he? But he can feed calves with pumpkin creepers?"

Sivaramier looked at the torn creeper before him.

"Is it for this petty thing you broke his head?" he asked.

"It may be petty to you, but it is very important to me," he said truculently.

"Oh God! look at the wound," exclaimed Sivaramier as he bandaged the boy's head. "Do you realize that a little more force would have killed him?"

"He deserves that," the other retorted.

Sivaramier's usually calm face became florid in an instant. "There is a limit to

madness," he said. This had always been his thought, but he had refrained from expressing it. Now he had said it without wishing to say it—and too late.

Venkataramier's face was a study. The parted lips twitched and curled. The words at first gurgled in his throat.

"You dare—you dare to call me mad man," he stammered. "I will show my madness here and now. I will come over that side and beat him and anybody who comes to support him."

"If you are a man, you ought to carry out your words. Here is a broom ready, come on," invited Sivaramier. There was grim determination in his eyes. Friends quickly intervened on either side. They had already let things go very far. Sivaramier was not difficult to pacify. He was amenable to reason. But the other man was unappeasable. He was executing a sort of war dance. Nanu Grandpa tried all his powers of persuasion on him.

"Venkatarama, you should'nt forget the past—nor the future," appealed the old man. "This angry moment will pass in no time but words will stick. Who is he, who are you? Have you forgotten that your child and his are to wed?"

This last question was a blunder. By no other means could he have promoted the quarrel better.

"I will rather have my son wed a Pariah's girl than this idiot's daughter," he thundered. This was bad enough but when he added "For all I care let him marry her to a Pariah's son," he had crossed the Rubicon.

The words sent Sivaramier wheeling about for something handy. There was nothing in view but a small lump of brittle earth. He seized it and flung it at him with all his might. It lost half its volume in the motion, and landing straight between his brows, settled to dust which amply covered

his eyes. The damage to his eyes was greater than that to his forehead. But Sivaramier was not satisfied with the result. Venkataramier's fence once again served a useful purpose, though this time in his own favour. For, with all his wiry form, he was no match for the muscular and heavy-built Sivaramier. It was some work for the latter's friends to take him into the house.

Venkataramier raged for some time, threatening of the things he would do,—prosecution, taking the law into his own hands and so forth.

Till the evening, the air was full of subdued hostility. A small group of friends were seated on Venkataramier's pial, pacifying, advising. There was a similar group on Sivaramier's pial.

With the cooling night, their tempers also cooled, and with the cooling of temper came introspection and with it common sense.

Venkataramier's injured eyes now and then sent a spasm of rage flitting through all his nerve-centres, but he had not received the injury for nothing.

That was some consolation.

The recurring thought of his neighbour's caustic words made Sivaramier bite his lips, but he had taken the sting out of them by serving him well. A smile flickered over his lips at the remembrance of the earth-washed face of his quondam friend.

Both were sorry for what had happened, each in his own way. They would have given anything to have been out of it.

With passing days, the absurdity of their quarrel became more apparent. Men whispered many things, not to the credit of Venkataramier, to whom they assigned the loser's end.

The womenfolk were not less busy with their gossip. Some maintained that Paroo would either marry Sambu or remain a maid

for life. Some were inclined to believe that her duty to her parents would prevail over her natural love for Sambu. Anyhow, the situation was getting interesting, and they eagerly looked for the upshot.

Months passed and Sambu came home for the Christmas holidays, but it was a cheerless home. He knew his misery was shared by another in the next house, and the thought increased his pain. He rarely went out, and was always buried in his books. He longed to see Paroo but some inexplicable fear or shame, he could not tell which, kept him back.

One day, as he was listlessly loitering in the garden, he saw Paroo on the other side, cleaning something. Evidently, she was there on purpose. He looked at her sorrowful face, and she looked back at him. They stood still for a minute gazing at each other, eye speaking to eye with greater eloquence than tongue. Just then Venkataramier came into the garden to call his son, and noticing

them, quietly retired. Not a word on that incident was exchanged between the father and the son.

A few days after, there came a night of fierce storm and incessant rain. Thunder rent the sky. Trees were uprooted. Branches broke and crashed against each other and covered the roads.

Several houses collapsed and many a house sustained damage of some kind or other. It was a night of destruction, a night to remember.

As Venkataramier's zeal for work had stopped with gardening, he had woefully neglected the repairs of his house, and the result was that his household had to shift from room to room and finally shelter in one small terraced apartment, which was their cash as well as store room. It was here that Sambu trod on something shiny, and before he could realize what it was, a cobra stung him with a hiss and glided out

of the room. His mother was the first to see its retreating form in the dim flickering light and raise the alarm. His father seized a ruler and rushed after it, but it was too quick for him. Only when Sambu sat on his heels, clutching his ankle and groaning with pain, did his mother understand that he was bitten. Then she screamed. Her cry caught the ear of Sivaramier's wife on the other side of the wall, who got up from her bed in panic and leaned against the wall below the window listening.

"Oh, my God! it has bitten Sambu," wailed Sambu's mother.

"Where? where?" cried the anxious father running to his son who mutely pointed to his ankle.

He hastily removed his upper cloth and wound it firmly round the thigh to stop the circulation of the poison, in his own crude way, and even as he was doing so, his son was falling into a swoon.

"Oh God! let him alone. Run to brother Sivaramier and bring him at once," cried the mother.

Venkataramier gasped and trembled. There was an abject helplessness about him. He would have obeyed anything and anybody at that time, and he hurried.

Meanwhile on the other side of the wall to wake her husband and apprise him of Sambu's danger was a moment's work for Sivaramier's wife. Sivaramier was up in an instant. There was something more than his general kindness in his anxiety to run to the rescue. He had never any false pride in him. There was no need to wait till he was called. He took his medicine and sallied forth. But in his haste, he slipped and fell down in the wet mud of the court-yard.

But for this mishap, proud Venkataramier would have been saved the humiliation of being forced to make the first move towards reconciliation. As it was, he was a moment

too quick. He came in just as Sivaramier was rising to his feet, and faltered in a hollow voice, " A cobra has bitten Sambu."

" Come on ! " said Sivaramier, hurrying past him and he meekly followed. At any other time, he would not have failed to notice the strange preparedness of Sivaramier, and would have asked whether he had taken the medicine. But just then, it seemed natural to him that his neighbour should be awake at that untimely hour, with the medicine on his person for emergencies. In the noise and confusion, Paroo also woke up and followed her mother to Venkataramier's house.

Sambu was quite unconscious by now. Sivaramier thrust some medicine into his mouth and rubbed it against his tongue. He applied something to the wound. Then, with half closed eyes, he began to work his spell.

The mothers wept, and Paroo too began to sob. Venkataramier lost all his self-

possession, and with watery eyes blew his nose now and then. Sivaramier alone was cool and collected, devoutly chanting his *mantrams* in murmurs.

In this way one most anxious hour passed. Then Sambu slightly moved his legs. Sivaramier nodded his head with satisfaction and continued his prayers. After some more minutes, Sambu opened his eyes, and silently stared at everybody in the room. When he found Paroo standing by his side, a weary smile spread over his face.

"Have you killed the snake?" he asked in a limp voice.

"No, darling," said his mother, taking his face in both her hands. "Let it go, child. Thank God, you have escaped; thank God! You have once more put life into me"

"Do you see Uncle Sivaramier?" his father asked. "It is all his—".

Sivaramier cut him short.

"Don't worry him, please. Let him quietly rest. Sleep if you feel inclined, Sambu."

It was still about two hours to dawn. The rain had stopped and darkness was just clearing into grey mist.

A wary cock proclaimed its first crow. Save for the croaking of the frogs and the hum of the beetles, everything was still.

They sat silent for some time facing each other. Venkataramier broke the silence. "Evil deeds never fail to show their evil effects." He paused.—"To think that we should have very nearly ruined the children's happiness and our own—for nothing, for the sake of a petty pumpkin creeper!"

"Oh, don't let us think of that wretched affair, just now," said Sivaramier.

"Not that—I am only anxious—I—I may not be so bad as you might think."

"Don't I know you, brother?"

THE CALL OF THE KIND.

"I won't," the boy cried, struggling to free his tuft from his father's grip and hopping to the lash of a long wiry tamarind twig.

His screams brought the mother.

"Should you torment him, auspicious day or no, and the first thing in the morning?" she protested.

"Mind your business, foolish one," retorted Krishnier. "He can't find time to do his lessons, to do anything useful, but will make flutes and flutes, enough to make his funeral pyre. Look at them," he said pointing to a corner of the courtyard. There lay twisted and broken, about a dozen flutes, mostly made of reed and a few of bamboo. The mother burst into laughter, the severity of the father's face relaxed into a thinly veiled smile, and the boy himself grinned through his tears.

"Don't be naughty, Narayana. Study well and be a good boy," was the mother's plaintive advice. Narayanan nodded his head repentantly and slipped away.

Once out of his father's sight, he raced to the old Siva temple, looked about him to see if the coast was clear, and climbed to the creeper-covered roof of the Saturn God's dwelling. He pushed aside the creepers, which concealed a big crack in the inner vault, and stifled a joyous shout. There rested exactly as he had left it, his own dear flute. Its silver cap, stealthily made to order, with the savings of his pocket money, glistened in the morning dew. He snatched it, gave it a quick polish, and concealing it in his clothes, made his exit from the temple. His father was a problem to him,—as much as he to his father. It was the second time he had punished him for making flutes. The next time he caught him at it, he was sure he would drive him

out of the house, or even do something still worse. But he was bitten with the curse of not merely playing on the flute, but also spreading its, "message" and had a lot of chums to co-operate with him in his mission. He had infected all the boys of his age with his passion for fluting—and the result was annoying and disconcerting sounds in every house where there was a boy.

It was for this "evil influence" that he had incurred the displeasure of his friends' parents likewise. But he had got beyond the stage of minding displeasure. The only thing that told with him was corporal punishment, and he was trying to get used to it.

Narayanan had not much idea about religion. But he and his friends daily visited the temple, and it might well have been his general prayer "to be saved from his father."

On this particular evening, he prayed rather long. This might have been due to the morning's incident. But his friend Somu, who knew him better, suspected that there was something up his sleeve. "What is the idea ?" he asked.

But Narayanan only frowned and prayed on.

"What is the idea ?" persisted Somu.

"I am offering four cocoanuts to Ganesha if father's intended journey to Salem comes off all right."

"What for ?"

"Oh, for a very good reason. But how does it concern you ? Will you help ?"

"If I can," said Somu cautiously.

"You are always frightened. But I am not asking much. To-morrow is Saturday, isn't it ? and we have *bhajan*. If my father starts for Salem, I shall tell mother that after the *bhajan* I am taking my bed beside you on your pial, and she will believe it all right,

and I shall go to Nagari. You have just to tell nobody about this," said Narayanan.

"And what takes you to Nagari in the night?" queried Somu, his curiosity aroused.

"To hear the fluting of the greatest and most learned singer, Ramlal of Tanjore," said Narayanan, straightening himself up, and throwing back his head, as if that august personage were himself. "He has been invited by Vairan Chettiar, the rich landlord, for his daughter's marriage," he added.

The news was sensational. All the boys in a chorus said they would accompany him. Narayanan only smiled with the smile of the wise.

"You dare not, any of you," he said and that was true. With the reality of the existence of interfering and autocratic parents, their ardour died as suddenly as it arose. They could only promise to carry out his wishes faithfully. But there was another doubt. Was not the path, particularly near

the ruined Rama's temple, haunted by devils? Narayanan might be bold enough to deceive and disobey his father, steal cocoanuts by climbing even the tallest palm and do many other things besides. But face the devil he simply could not; and if it happened to be a fire-devil,—God save him!

"I am not such a fool as to overlook all that," he said; "you don't know what lots of people are going from our village to hear him. At any rate, Paralytic Rengu, Neckless and Spider-leg are surely going, and I intend to give them a sufficient start and follow them. You see," he continued, with a shake of his shoulders, "I shall take my supper early and be loitering about the *bhajan* Mutt till they set out, and then creep behind as noiselessly as I can. Do you think there is anything to fear with those burly old fellows in front of me?" he asked

They had their own doubts, but did not express them. They only marvelled at his courage.

Narayanan's prayer bore fruit. His father left for Salem. True to their proposal, not only Paralytic Rengu, Neckless and Spider-leg, but several others also made up the party. The reinforcement only gave him additional courage, and he carried out his plan. There was absolutely no trouble. They moved in an easy leisurely fashion, singing merrily. Once only did he nearly betray himself, and that was when Barrel-Nose Grandpa began to sing, or rather howl, causing the rest to roar with laughter. The only thing he began to complain about was their slow progress. If they jogged on at that rate, he was certain they would arrive only when half the performance was over. And he so wanted to hear everything, right from the beginning. No, that alone won't do. He must sit near that great master, facing him, watch his face, and watch the play of his fingers on the flute. Whom would he resemble?—but confound these lazy people, who wouldn't walk faster. He had no patience

with them. His hands yearned to fling stones at them. He clenched his fists and in that way gave vent to his wrath. They would take eternity to finish that distance.

With great endurance, he restrained his pace till they reached the Paracheri, the hamlet of the untouchables. He knew walking through the Cheri would save him a lot of distance, and with no devils to fear amidst human habitations. Where was the harm in entering a Cheri? Anyway, who was going to see him in the night?—He dashed through its dirty uneven streets. His hasty trot brought a pack of barking street dogs behind him. He stood his ground, faced them boldly and waved them away with his hands. His slackened pace brought no more trouble from that quarter. With a beating heart he stole through lanes and byelanes and reached Nagari proper, far ahead of the others. Oh, what a crowd before Vairan Chettiar's house! He ran into the huge throng and elbowed his way to the gate, regardless of question-

ing eyes and slang protests. But the gate was closed and an inexorable and fearful-looking watchman was keeping back the swaying crowd from rushing the gate. Narayanan's enthusiasm received a severe check from that worthy's steely palm.

For a moment, the world appeared to him in a state of chaotic confusion.

Had his worst fears been realized? Yes, the hall was packed, and there was no admittance for anybody.

What with the disappointment, the strain, the excitement and the cruel grip on his throat, his childish heart melted. His natural courage deserted him, and he cried. But his brain did not cease to function. He planned a ruse in a flash. He dried his tears, drew out his flute from its hiding place and pleaded with the gate-keeper.

'Do let me in, my good man. I am one of the disciples of Professor Ramlal. I shall

be undone if I am not present at the performance. The Professor will dismiss me."

The gate-keeper looked him over. The boy's sincerity of tone moved him a little. But many more would rush if he were let in.

No, he wasn't going to take any risks. Professor's disciple or no, he must do his duty.

Narayanan scowled, yet the gate-keeper was not to blame. It was the work of those lazy loafers whose halting steps he was forced to follow. He retired into the crowd. He reconnoitered for any possible avenue of entrance into the house, and having no hope he selected a convenient place wherefrom he could at least hear the great master without disturbance. It was an appreciative crowd that had collected there. It maintained perfect silence. The sweet resonant languorous notes of the flute floated down the still night air.

Hark! that was the Bhairavi tune, his own favourite one. Oh, how like his! the

rise and fall, the tremor, the twists and passes! Who was playing? Was it himself? Two unconscious hands raised the flute to his lips. The lips still more unconsciously screwed and breathed music into its tiny holes. A few resentful voices tried to 'shoo' him down. But the interruption was too feeble. The music of the two flutes had merged into each other. There was not the least discordance. The standers by gazed at him with admiration. He could be no mean artist to play that feat. But he himself was as unaware of their admiration as of their previous resentfulness. He was lost in a domain of indescribable bliss. Was it a mere chance or the recognition of an artistic soul by a greater one? Either the Professor lost his breath or paused deliberately at the most improper period of a note. It made no difference. Narayanan carried it on and finished it just as the Professor himself would have done. The Professor laughed. The audience was puzzled. The Professor took

up his flute quickly, and pitching upon a rare and difficult song, one of his own composition, paused for a while. It was a deliberate accommodative pause. It was something new and wonderful to Narayanan. He couldn't keep abreast of the melody. He could only repeat it, sound for sound, syllable for syllable, key for key, pitch for pitch.

The performance was splendid. He little knew that he was the cynosure of all eyes in the crowd. The Professor's pauses became numerous, affording ample scope for second fiddling, and he did his part splendidly to the end of the song, which was acclaimed with a tremendous applause from the seated audience within and the standing audience without.

Narayanan's wings dropped. The loud cheering brought him face to face with facts. His escapade was known. Crow-beak and Neckless, Barrel-Nose and Spider-Leg, one and all, would conspire to report to his father

and then—he was not allowed to continue his ruminations.

The obsequious gate-keeper waited on the Professor's disciple, hand and foot, to take him in.

The audience shouted and laughed as he was led in. The Professor laughed too and drew him to his side and patted him. He said something kind and loving. Narayanan knew not what. It was all so unreal. He had to bite his lips to know that he was not asleep, and in that confusion, he little dreamed that three years later there would be a fight among phonographers for the record of his songs.

THE ABUSE OF A CHANCE.

Three years of rural life and farm labour had not been sufficient to wean Ratnasamy from his urban ways—and vices. Smoking he still loved next to life, and it was whispered amongst his fellow workmen that he was a regular customer at the village tavern, and that he always went in for something stronger than common toddy.

These two things apart, and they affected nobody, he was the soul of honour among friends.

He was generous to a vice and spent whatever he earned.

"Whom have I to provide for?" he would say whenever his friends remonstrated with him.

"Drink is the only solace of ruined men, and death their salvation," he would add with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes.

His efficiency in agricultural work had not improved much since he took service under Ramanathier, the rich landholder. But his fund of knowledge, cheerful disposition and persuasive eloquence had gained him many friends, and these, while he beguiled the weary hours with stories and anecdotes, voluntarily shared his work. What more, he was on very intimate terms with Chidambaram whom the men nicknamed "Small Master." Chidambaram was a sort of guide, philosopher and friend to the master, who did nothing without consulting him. In fact, he had no particular function. His duty ranged from watering the paddy and cane fields to cleaning jewels and locking them in the safe. He was just thirty, but had faithfully served his master twenty years and become one of his own family.

To be befriended by such a man was no small compliment to Ratnasamy. His city-bred manners and ready tongue made a great appeal to Chidambaram, and after the day's

work the two generally paired off and had many confidences. It was a wonder to many how a very reserved fellow like Chidambaram allowed so much intimacy to one comparatively a stranger.

One evening, they were rather late returning from the field. They were leisurely walking behind the two milch cows which slowly moved, chewing the cud in solid contentment. The thickening dusk, the still air, the tall palms on either side of the canal bund, and the rythmic hum of the beetles lent a dignified serenity to the atmosphere.

"It is to be done now or never," said Ratnam with a violent gesture and stopping short.

"You can't rush things that way, brother. We have got to reckon with the future. Nothing like prudence, you know," said Chidambaram in a pleading voice.

"Prudence is another name for cowardice, Chidambaram. Opportunity doesn't come often."

Chidambaram bit his lip, wincing under the rebuke, but the other man couldn't see his face in the darkness.

"I admit I am a coward. But what makes me a coward is not fear but gratitude."

"You are not murdering your master; you are not ruining him. Five thousand rupees he will no more miss than we our two-anna piece for a peg of toddy. You said the other day that you had benefited him to the extent of fifty thousand rupees by your scheme of land reclamation. Morally half, if not the whole, of that amount belongs to you. If he were a man of such high principles as you take him to be, he would have given you something."

"He may."

"When?—after he is dead? Don't you have any vain hope, Chidambaram. I am older than you, and I have known that sort in the city."

"But our master is different."

" Mere madness, human nature is everywhere the same. Well, I don't want to press this further. I am a forlorn man. I want to pass the rest of my days under your roof. Your interest is mine. I am only anxious that you should provide well for your wife and children. You can't save anything, and you aren't going to work all your life. And what about the future of the boys? Think of the city and its possibilities for them—education, position, honour, wealth. I don't want my share of the money. I can depend on you for food and shelter for the rest of my days. Only give me now and then a few annas to appease the devil that possesses me."

" When the drink mania comes on you, you get so different, brother," said Chidambaram. " Nobody would think you were the same man who voluntarily chose poverty and celibacy to secure a brother's happiness. Can't you try to give it up gradually?"

" Give it up! I can give it up only with my life, my dear fellow. Not that I care

about life. Death is welcome to me at any moment—now—this instant. But it is a long time in the coming to the like of me, Chidambaram. I sometimes, especially when I have the craze but am not able to satisfy it, feel so wretched that I want to do away with my self."

"Oh, don't talk like that, brother. You will see I will effect a cure."

Ratnam laughed. "You are young and hope is the privilege of youth. But we are straying from our subject. What are you going to do to-night? Remember, the master doesn't keep loose cash every day in his box. To-morrow he may remit it to the bank."

"So you want me to take the risk to-night?"

"You run no risk save a little pricking of conscience."

"I am glad you admit that."

The dark night facilitated matters, and Chidambaram finished his work within fifteen

minutes, and rejoined Ratnam who was patiently waiting for him in the backyard under the mango-tree. The box, though heavy, was portable, and was taken charge of by Ratnam.

Then without anything untoward happening, they managed to get over the compound wall and slip on to the canal bund. After a little cogitation, they resolved to bury the box in the Hermit's Mound, a thickly wooded island of about thirty acres in the Kaveri, which was rarely visited by the villagers owing to its remote situation, and never used as a grazing ground like other islands.

But reaching that island did not prove so easy as they thought. The flood had made so many changes in the bed of the river that they had to wade, swim and cross quicksands in the most unexpected places before they landed. Tired with the exertion both the men rested for a while, when Chidam-

-baram suddenly got up and prostrated himself before Ratnam. And before the latter recovered from the usrprise of this dramatic act, he burst forth in a pathetic appeal.

" For God's sake, let us go back, brother. In a fit of madness, I have allowed myself to be persuaded to doing this. I do not blame you. No—you don't know—can't know—what I owe to our master and his wife. They picked me up, a beggarly orphan, at the age of seven, treated me as one of their own children, made a man of me, got me married and settled me in life. To think that of all men I should have done this! Oh, it is revolting! I cannot bear it. You are a man of noble impulses, brother, and I appeal to your sense of honour—Would you have done this were you in my place? I entreat you not to mistake me. You cannot know the magnitude of my crime. No punishment will wash away my sin. I should never have even thought of this despicable act. Do let us

go back, brother. From this day forward you need not even work. I will support you to the end of your days. I know you love me. It was that love that prevailed over your judgment. But I ought not to have allowed it. Am I not right? Say yes or no. Your silence oppresses me, brother."

"You are right," said the other in a feeble voice.

"I entreat you again and again, brother, not to blame yourself on any account. It is all my fault, and now let us return before it is too late," he said taking the box and leading the way. The two walked back without exchanging a word. Each was busy with his own thoughts without caring to divine the other's.

About a furlong from the house, Chidambaram turned to take the foot-path to the back-yard, so as to replace the box as stealthily as he had removed it.

Ratnam dejectedly moved on to the street. As he turned the corner, a sudden impulse took hold of him. He ground his teeth. "The little idiot, he to teach me my duty!" he muttered to himself, and headed straight for the master's house. Then in the twinkling of an eye, he roused the whole household with shouts of "burglars."

For the next few minutes pandemonium reigned supreme in the house. Distracted servants and other inmates ran hither and thither. Some thought the house was on fire, others took it that the master was seriously ill. Only a few understood that the house was being burgled. Ramanathier rushed from his room with just a loin cloth on his person. But his ardour ceased on seeing a dark form near the stairs with something in its hand. Courage was never his strong point, and he began to shout incoherently. His voice soon attracted the rest, and in the light of the waving lanterns the shivering form of Chidambaram was visible. Fear

and surprise were depicted on every face. There was a moment of tense and painful silence. Ramanathier was too excited to speak.—" So—it is you after all," he said at last. " Biting the hand that fed you ?"

Chidambaram groaned. By now he had recovered from his first shock. He faced his audience boldly. His eyes wandered till they rested on Ratnam skulking in a corner with his head bowed down.

" You are a villain," he shouted. " I never thought you would be so mean as this. Swear by your father's grave, did you not egg me on to do this work ? Had you no part in this business? What do you think I shall suffer—imprisonment, the ruin of my family ? But how will these things benefit you ?—Don't think he was all this time sleeping innocently in the house," he said turning to his master and the rest. " We have just returned from the Hermit's Mound, where he wanted to have this box safely buried.

It took all my efforts to convince him of the rascality of our act and persuade him to come back."

"Oh, where had been that wonderful honesty when you removed the box from the house?" said the master.

Chidambaram flinched. He cleared his throat and spoke in a tremulous voice.

"I hadn't the least idea to steal, Master. I admit that I exceeded my limits in planning this silly adventure. It was that faithless creature I wanted to reform. For he has many good things in him in spite of his wickedness. He has been worrying me for a long time to do this, and finding all my remonstrances with him to be in vain I removed this box just to let him have his own way for a bit and then bring him round. I gave him a chance and he has abused it."

"A very good way of reforming—with a cash box in the Hermit's Mound at dead of night! Why do you lie, ungrateful fool?

One falsehood leads to many. I am not going to punish you. Remorse will do that. But if you want to save your skin, never again let me see your face." Chidambaram clenched his fists. His broad chest heaved and tears welled to his eyes.

" You too believe that of me," he sobbed rather than spoke, and with a violent crash threw down the box and strewed the floor with pebbles.

FINIS.